THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR AS STORY-TELLER: SUGGESTIONS FROM PAUL MCBOURNE'S WORK

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Abstract
Contrary to what the dominant meta-narrative and what the mass media have taught, narrative religious education should follow a hermeneutic of fiction. It should be, in other words, education in perception, in seeing, in hearing; a school of factuality and imaginative variation, and a school of responsiveness, remembering, and solidarity. Fictionality means to realize the "difference," to realize the "it could-be-otherwise" in order to play imaginatively with new worlds. Responsiveness means not only to be aware of the otherness of the other, but, as we can say with Ricœur, learning to see oneself as another.

THE ELIMINATION OF FICTION: CONGELATION OF RELIGION
Violence, exploitation, self-destruction, catastrophic risk for the ecology, and the human alienation in all its dimensions are our reality. The disenchantment of the world, the growing assumption of power by forces of rationalization and technology, and the project of modernity seemingly has turned into an iron cage. This leaves little room for fiction.

This does not mean that there are no narratives in our world, but that narrative has been distorted or disfigured. It is the perspective of Jean-François Lyotard (1984, 1986, 1986) that the reality of our world is governed and colonized by meta-stories. The project of modernity cope with legitimation stories that narrate the emancipation of reason and liberty, the salvation by capitalist progress, or the schedule of a kind of Christian-based telology (which is a rather distorted version of Christian eschatology).

This meta-narrative, to be sure, is a specific kind of story; it is the legitimation myth of modernity, and it is the myth that explains that it could not be otherwise. The distortion of narrativity is characterized by the following difference: meta-narratives eliminate names; they are not told to remember people. Meta-narratives are Big Stories and differ from "small" narratives in that names and all kinds of particularities are eliminated in order to form The Story (Lyotard 1984, 231).

This project of modernity, Lyotard contends, has not been forgotten or given up, but it has encountered serious difficulties. At issue here is the paradigmatic name for the tragically "unfashioned" character of modernity, Lyotard says. How can the big legitimation stories still sound credible? How can they, despite their questionablecredibility, continue to be told very effectively by the mass media? If Lyotard is right in his characterization of this quintessence of the meta-story of modernity as the narrative of negative extropy, it is obvious that by definition "fiction"—the creative alternative, the not-governed-by-dispositions, the never-heard-of, and the unexpected—has been eliminated. Meta-stories, especially that of negative extropy, make other stories irrelevant and exclude other narratives, for they preclude self-sufficiency. How can we come already into a situation in which story-telling has no chance and has come to an end?

The mass media themselves have their share in the destruction of fiction. The philosopher Gérard Genette alerts us to the disfiguration of human freedom and creativity by mass media communication. Andert (1986, 197) contends that the "running pictures" and the machines that deliver them replace speaking, that they take us from the necessity to speak up and make us dependent; that "perception" has become problematic and anticipated (cf. 1980, 56), and, of special importance for our theme, that "factuality" is being destroyed, especially when the fictional ever assumes the character of a real event, for it is produced and communicated in the same way as information about real events (1986, 143).

These radical analyses shed light on the very heart of our concern—religion, as I will try to demonstrate, for the key theme of...
salvation. More specifically, Lottman's radical critique of the meta-
narrative alerts us for the fragility of religious narrativity, it alerts us
for the restriction or elimination of Fictionality in religion, and it alerts
for the conglo- gation of religion.

"Salvation" can be interpreted by the symbol of redemption of
men and women with God. However, for a large number of religious
communities "salvation" is understood as concerning only the indi-
vidual self, as if it had nothing to do with the body and with society.
Such a limited version of "salvation" and "redemption" can easily
be integrated in a subordinated place of the narrative that legitimizes
the status-quo of our world—not to speak of the opinion quality
of religion.

What has happened here? Our explanation would be to attest to
an exclusion of parts of the salvation story. The yearning for the work
of healing and justice in our world has been eliminated from the sal-
vation story. The image of religious visions and prophecy arising also
at the work of healing the world has been sacrificed. And it would
useful be to be proposed that, despite the theological necessity to distin-
guish between the two meanings of salvation, heil and wohlf in De-
german theological terms, the two cannot be separated and the one side
must not be held up at the cost of the other.

The English word "salvation," as Paul Tillich emphasizes, is able
and is meant to embrace both meanings. Joergen Molmann has been
influential in bringing both sides into a balance by emphasizing the
political meaning of salvation. Another explanation seems even more
convincing, but should make us more concerned. It is the sup-
position that, in these cases, the narrative of salvation has been con-
gested into a theory of salvation—at the cost not only of entire dimen-
sions of salvation, but also at the cost of its innovative and creative
potential. And the cure for this would consist in regaining the narr-
ativity of the salvation story.

This is an even more congealed form of religion, for an even more
restricted use of fiction appears in fundamentalism. Fundamentalism,
it can be stated, is characterized by the almost complete elimination of
fiction. The fundamentalist manifesto demands and makes people
subscribe to a literal understanding of the holy books; and it is enacted
that all scientific results that contradict the religious truth in funda-
mentalism interpretation, of course) have to be dismissed.

How about the sciences that are in line with the literal un-
derstanding of the religious texts? These are not only tolerated, but also
held up as they were holy texts themselves. The fundamentalist lan-
guage, if we take the argumentation used in creationism or millen-
arianism as examples, allows as much fictionality as ordinary natural
science language in the 19th century. The religious story about the be-
ginning and the end and the salvation story of humanity is told as if
they were natural science theories. Fundamentalism has its own
meta-story, which structurally resembles the meta-story of modernity.
And in fact fundamentalism is a product of modernity and is modern
anti-modernism. It is the explicit declaration of the death of fiction
in religion.

That not only fictionality, but also narrativity is suppressed in funda-
mentalism, could easily be demonstrated by some quotes from inter-
views with members of fundamentalist groups whom we inter-
viewed in our research into progress at the University of Bielefeld. Fun-
damentalists can hardly tell their personal story. But answer with
quotes from the Bible and recount only the meta-story that is told by
the fundamentalist group in which the standardized personal fate has
been integrated. In fundamentalism, life history, biography, and auto-
biography belong; as it were, to a foreign language. The interviewees
had hard time getting fundamentalists to talk personally, to tell som-
ething that would fit into the framework of narrative interviews.

These disqualifications are only the overstatement of a danger that is
intrinsic to every kind of religion: that concreteness takes over, that
symbols are made into things, that religious rituals are used for magi-
c manipulation, and that religion has been congealed into a fiction-less
disqualification. The absence of fiction is not the release in religious
business as usual, but it means to give in to forces of manipulation and
alienation. Religion can be either creative or congealed.

Is there an alternative, a reversal for such distortion, a healing
development and learning process? The chance of regaining the sym-
bolic quality of religious texts and rituals, of regaining the narrativity
of religious language, and of developing a new appreciation of Fictional-
ality depends on a clarification in hermeneutics.

LIBERATING RELIGION: THE POWER OF FICTION TO REMAKE REALITY

The work of healing the world as response to and inspired by
our religious visions requires and features a specific understanding
of how religious language and religious texts accomplish this task. It
requires a hermeneutic of vision or, as I would like to say, a hermeneutic of fiction that relates the human alienation to salvation and healing in all dimensions. What would be the adequate form of such a hermeneutic of fiction? Here the work of Paul Ricoeur provides promising insights.

Ricoeur’s philosophical analyses provide great insights in the hermeneutics of symbol, of metaphor (1975), and of narrative (1981a; 1984; 1985). His book on identity, in which we find the most advanced conceptualization of narrative identity, is his (1980) Soi-même comme un autre (Chewelf as Anchor). Briefly I attempt to summarize the points of Ricoeur’s philosophy, which are of special importance for a hermeneutic of fiction.

The “Detour” or the “Roundabout Way”

It is a basic structure of Ricoeur’s philosophy to develop a hermeneutics of suspicion, to promote critique of illusions, and to confront philosophy and common-sense understanding with sharp critique in so far that they rest on the assumption of a self-sufficient, self-reflexive ego. In his analyses of metaphor and of narrative, he is fighting, as he explains, on two fronts and argues against two misperceptions: one is the exclusivity of rational explanation and the other is the illusion of immediate understanding. Explanation and the descriptive use of language are not problematic or false in themselves, but become so when they are taken as the only and exclusive approaches, especially when we deal with such multi-dimensional phenomena as symbols, metonymies, and narratives. Fiction cannot be accounted for adequately in these categories. Also, for religion, I maintain, descriptive language promotes a reductionistic approach; religion does not fit into this strait-jacket with its illogicality aiming toward the identity of the idea, for this kind of identity, the death of the fiction, is the exclusion of the it-could-be-otherwise. Religion, when put into this strait-jacket, has lost its symbolic multi-dimensionality. The surplus of meaning of the symbol, the vehemence and power of living metaphor, and the creativity of narrative have been sacrificed on the altar of concreteness.

On the other hand, Ricoeur cannot follow the diltheyan enthusiasm with understanding when understanding is taken as immediate intuition or is based on the assumption of some kind of congruence between the author and the reader. Ricoeur cannot accept the irrationalism of immediate understanding, acquired as an extension to the domain of the tests of the empathy by which a subject puts himself in the place of a fact; the consciousness in a situation of face-to-face intimacy. This would extend maintain the romantic illusion of a direct link of congruence between the subjectivities implied in the work, that of the author and that of the reader (1981b, 144).

Instead, Ricoeur suggests to take the “roundabout way.” He argues that there is no other way to arrive at understanding the world and at self-understanding than taking the “detour.” “In contrast to the tradition of the cogito and to the pretension of the subject to know itself by immediate intuition, it must be said that we understand ourselves only by the long detour of the signs of humanity deposited in cultural works” (1975b, 143).

In regard to our theme of fiction, these strong theses of Ricoeur underscore the necessity of mediation when the illusory shortcut of immediacy has been exposed, we see the need for mediation. And fiction is one of the textual manifestations that accomplish mediation. More precisely, fiction is the prominent gesture of that mediation. This is obvious when we now take a closer look into the working of semantic innovation.

Fiction As Semantic Innovation

All three linguistic forms that have been the focus of Ricoeur’s reflection have at least one element in common: they work with difference and variation, and all depart from and resist one-dimensional understanding of language as descriptive one-to-one relation. This is true in particular for narrative fiction. Fiction—that defines the sharp contrast to ideologies and meta-stories—implies a specific difference: the notion that it could be otherwise. Fiction has a double reference: it refers to a particular situation, a person, a group—these are represented predominantly in the story material, the characters of the fictional narrative; and it points to a fictional alternative, the entirely new invention of a fictional plot. Fiction is an it-could-be-
otherwise-story. Fiction is the prominent form of what in social pheno-
menology has been called the "consciousness of difference" (Dif-
ferenzbewusstsein)" (Craftoff 1995).

The set of understanding a fictional narrative can be paralleled
to the workings of metaphor. It involves a similar dialectic between
explanation and understanding. In the process of understanding a
metaphor, a new semantic relevance emerges from the ruins of
semantic non-relevance as this appears in a literal reading of
the sentence. Fiction is semantic innovation. A hermeneutic of fiction is
a hermeneutic of semantic innovation, of narrative variation.

In his book on identity, Ricoeur has given us a powerful metaphor
for the workings of this semantic innovation of fiction in narrative
identity: the laboratory for thought experiments. "Littérature," he says
there, "proves to consist in a vast laboratory for thought experiments
in which the resources of variation encompassed by narrativity are
put to the test of narration" (1990, 149).

Fiction and Transfiguration

It may be surprising, at first sight, that Ricoeur in his phrase "Fic-
tion has the power to remake reality" links "reality" and the "power
to change it to one of the seemingly most surrealistic literary forms:
fictional narrative. But only at first sight. When we take a closer look
in the work of Ricoeur, we find fiction as one of the key concepts in
his perspective on how collective and personal life can do both—
develop an identity and experience change and transformation.

Ricoeur made the following observation:

Narrative fiction "molds" human action, not only in that, before
referring to the text, it refers to our own pre-understanding of the
meaningful structures of action and its temporal dimensions, but also
in that it contributes, beyond the text, to reshaping these struc-
tures and dimensions in accordance with the imaginative config-
uration of the plot. Fiction has the power to "remake" reality and,
within the framework of narrative fiction in particular, to remake
real space to the extent that the text intentionally situates at a horizon
of new reality which we may call a world. It is this world of the text
which interests us in the world of action in order to give it a new con-
figuration or, as we might say, in order to transfigure it (1988, 189).

What, in the theory of the symbol, Ricoeur has identified as
the "surplus of meaning," and what, in the theory of metaphor, he
called the "ontological relevance" of "living" metaphor, in the theory
of narrative is paralleled by the "transfiguring power of employment.
All these literary forms—it is Ricoeur's merit to have invested intense
analytical sharpness and volubility with bringing this to our
attention—have in common this gift of "new worlds," however, with
different reach and reference to the context. It is the special feature of
the last of the three double-meaning expressions, narrative, to refer to
a text and to refer inevitably to a context. This is expressed in the above
quote in both reference directions, pre-understanding and trans-
figuration, narrative fiction refers to structures of action, to temporal
dimensions, and to a world of action. When, therefore, for Ricoeur,
fiction is the key term also for truth, it is clear that the truth claims of
fiction consists precisely in its transfiguring power, which is aimed
toward the world of action.

In Sein-nen comme un autre, Ricoeur has given an account of the
transfiguring power of fiction primarily in regard to our personal iden-
tity and biography. Consistent with his sharp critique of the exclu-
sivity of the philosophy of the ego, Ricoeur declares one-sided and
insufficient the taken-for-granted understanding of identity as same-
ness. With the help of the distinction between idem and ipsa, he is
able to put a new and even more important kind of identity in sharp
relief: ipse-identity or selfhood.

We can discern, therefore, two kinds of permanence in time, the
"restoration of character" and the "constancy of self in promising," in
keeping with one's word (1990, 124). And already in this basic distinc-
tion, the role and significance of fiction becomes clear. While idem-
identity or sameness is constituted by a self-identical subject, a self-
identical substantial being of the person, and is therefore not so
much dependent on other resources, ipse-identity or selfhood gives
itself to the mediation by cultural works, and narratives in particular.
It is dependent on narrative fiction, and it takes shape in the "labora-
tory of thought experiments."

Thus, Ricoeur can talk about the narrative unity of life as "an un-
stable mixture of fabrication and real experience." And he goes on to say

\[\text{Footnote:} \text{See my article "Frühe Zeiten als Empfänglichvie von Identität" (Sohlw 1994), in which I work this out in more detail in order to outline the implications for}
\text{religion education. The argument there is parallel to the one in this article, but}
\text{here I focus more on the discussion with developmental psychology and with post-
\text{modern conditions for narration.}\]
It is precisely because of the elusive character of real life that we need the help of fiction to organize life retrospectively, as the fact, prepared to take as provisional and open to revision any figure of employment borrowed from fiction or from history. And we also have the experience, however incomplete, of what is meant by ending a course of action, a slice of life. (168)

Narrative identity is the outcome (however provisional) of that kind of narrative interaction in which we read and relate to the variety of narratives that surround us. When personal identity is understood as narrative identity, the subject appears both as a reader and the writer of his or her life. Because, as Ricoeur in Time and Narrative (1988a, 945) says, the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told.

The ground and basis of ethics results from the very concept of selfhood. And this is of great relevance also for religion. The idea is consonant in the title of Ricoeur's 1990 study, Soi-même comme un autre / Oneself as Another, it is the idea of the privacy of the Other. Selfhood and the kind of permanence in time that belong to selfhood is constituted by the response to an Other, to the Other's calling me, to the Other's need, and to the Other's desire to count on me. Hence it is the promise to keep my word in faithfulness, to be responsive and responsible despite all the change in time that characterizes the identity of the self.

The perspective of narrative identity and of identity as selfhood has decisive ethical implications. Ricoeur (1990, 164) writes: "The thought experiments we conduct in the great laboratory of the imaginary are also explorations in the realm of good and evil. Treatvaluating, even devaluing is still evaluating. Moral judgment has not been abolished; it is rather itself subjected to the imaginary variations proper to fiction."

Religion, Fiction, and the Remaking of Reality

From Ricoeur's philosophical analyses, theology and religious studies can derive great insights in the surplus of meaning of symbol, the creativity and ontological coherence of metaphor, and the transfiguring power of narrative. The hermeneutics of fiction that I have tried to outline above can be especially instructive for a hermeneutics of religious narratives.
the development of Christian faith that concerns also the work of justice to the world must not be confused into an understanding of salvation as limited to the individual soul. To understand faith as anaesthetic solidarity (cf. Peucker 1970) is to listen and be responsive to stories; these stories are stories of the Other, also of the forgotten people, the oppressed, and the victims of history. Here it becomes obvious how far the Christian narrative is from being a meta-narrative in Lyotard’s terms.

THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR AS STORY-TELLER: NARRATIVE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

What I hope to have made visible in the previous section is the richness and precision that a hermeneutics of fiction can achieve when it is inspired by the philosophy of Paul Ricœur. The philosopher’s analysis aims beyond reminding religious educators of their occupational role as story-tellers and scholars as narrators—this has been done repeatedly in the literature on methods in religious education—it suggests as well a specific conceptualization of religious education, of the process of learning, of formations (Bildung), and of the development of religious identity. A different understanding and praxis in religious education is suggested, when we accept the thesis that fictional narratives and prophetic visions have the power to transform the world.

Based on this perspective, I elaborate my proposal to understand and account for religious education in terms of narratology, to talk of narrative religious education. Even though this proposal can refer to roots in narrative theology and understands itself as part of a “narrative turn” in the scientific study of religion, I am aware that I propose something not very common-sense. However, the narrative approach is one of the most adequate in our “communities of remembering and storytelling.” Therefore, I want to summarize the implication of the hermeneutics of fiction for religious education.

*This is the horizon to which I point in my article (Streib 1994), which I already mentioned above.

\[ \text{Comp. Day 1993; Day and Tappan 1996; Freeman 1995; Cogen 1994; also Streib 1999.} \]

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Turn the Mass Media Off—Go Out To Make Ex-Persistence

Religious education and its narrative approach are affected by, and entangled in, the ascendent development of mass media and myths. Compared with the entertainment quality and the effectiveness and perfection of mass media productions, the religious educator when telling a story often feels ashamed and imperfect, and that—much worse—the use of narratives in religious education appears as outmoded. Is the narrative approach in religious education antiquated already?

In the article, “Mass Media, Myth, and Narrative Religious Education” (Streib 1995), I conclude that, though the mass media may present a serious challenge, narrative identity that involves selfhood and subjectivity; particularity and pluralism; subversiveness and difference, has a chance, if we keep the mass media out from religious education as much as possible. And I question whether we should promote religious television shows, religious film productions, or computer games with religious themes, because the danger of such productions is not only that they risk turning religion and religious themes into entertainment packages, but that this supports the (in any point of view) misleading assumption that religious education is not more than instruction in a certain body of knowledge or the acquaintance with a set of propositions.

Finally there is too big a danger to buy the meta-narrative that is transported by the mass media. Only a kind of very limited appreciation for electronic communication may be suggested that is consistent with the criteria of narrative subversiveness. Stories told by films and videos can be of value, provided that they tell a narrative that contributes to selfhood, if they feature fictionality, dialecticity, and particularity, and if they present, as Metz would say, “dangerous memories” and tell “subversive narratives.”

Instead of taking the risk of an instrumentalizing and colonizing use of religion, religious educators should learn to trust the living narrative to elicit the students out of their world and make experience. We should take here the word “experience” in the literal Latin meaning of ex-perire, to go out, to go on a journey—in fantasy and imagination and in actually going on an excursion. The educational approach of encounter and actually going at certain places has been suggested decisively in inter-religious learning, in proposals for learn-
ing about the other religions; but this "method" of learning has implication for religious education in a much broader sense.

**Elicit Students Onto the Detour: Practice Listening to Symbols and Stories**

The detour or roundabout way is proposed by Ricoeur as a structure of hermeneutics in general and of a hermeneutics of fiction in particular. Each of its negative and positive meanings has implications for methods of religious education. The necessity of the detour is exposed in exclusivity avenues: explanation and immediate understanding. And the necessity of the detour contradicts the occasional use of symbols and stories for only decorative and rhetoric purpose. Therefore, in religious education, descriptive and explanatory use of language should reside in the background, and the language of immediacy should not be nursered, but religious educators should become specialists in helping students on the detour of listening and relating to symbols and narratives.

That this explanation is not a sufficient approach, especially when dealing with higher symbol systems such as religion, can hardly be denied. However, despite that, the praxis of religious education—and this is true not only for the German situation, I imagine—has a strong cognitive and explanatory focus. Certainly, much has to be explained and much has to be learned, if young people are introduced to the realms of religions and their own faith tradition. There is a necessary body of knowledge about church history and the contemporary religious situation, about the creeds and truth claims of one's religious tradition, and about the ethical and political implications of one's belief. But although this might be necessary, it is not sufficient. It should be made clear to the students implicitly and explicitly that descriptive and explanatory use of language is not sufficient.

There is a sharp distinction between narration and argumentation. As Jerome Bruner says, "There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinct ways of noticing experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another ... They differ radically in their procedure for verification. A good story and a well-formed argument are different natural kinds." This distinction, of course, has the aim of a greater appreciation and valuing of the narrative. Narrative defines a language game of its own. It is not a game of rational discourse, of competing for the best argument, but the game of story telling. In contrast to an argument as a proposition that is supposed to correspond to reality as close as possible, narrative invites a fictional perspective.

The alternative need that religious educators might find attractive, when they realize the insufficiency of descriptive and explanatory use of language, may be described as the approach featuring immediate understanding. The hermeneutical assumption of a contingency of today's reader with the author often is superimposed by the assumption that only truly religious—or even only second-born—people can understand the biblical texts. But even without fearing such externalization, it is a widespread assumption that, when the development of religion and faith is the aim, hermeneutics can be—or needs to be—left behind, and instead all kinds of immediacy are welcome; for example, the recommendation to focus on the encounter with religious symbols, but to use and rely on the inner eye. *6*

While I want to appreciate the emotional depth and life-structuring power of such encounter with religious symbols, it risks playing down or even eliminating reflection. Here the discussion on the use of symbols in religious education is well advised to take up the idea that Ricoeur has mentioned at the end of The Symbolism of Evil (1960): "second naivete." If we follow Ricoeur's argument, "second naivete" is kind of intense and life structuring signification of symbols that surpasses, but presupposes critical reflection. Therefore, despite the widespread misuse of Ricoeur's formula in support of a non-reflective immediacy, it needs to be kept in mind that "second naivete" belongs to a hermeneutical theory that asks, from the perspective of critical reflection, the question of whether there is a development beyond that critique. Ricoeur later explicitly states that the assumption of immediate understanding is not an adequate hermeneutical model.

Ricoeur's model of the detour stands in contrast to both onedimensional models of explanation, which feature a mono-directional line of description or analysis, and immediate understanding, which features the distinction of face-to-face encounter. The detour instead features new dimensions, a triangle, as it were. It invites the

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6 "Das innere Auge" is the title of a book of religious education that takes as an approach of working with symbols and promotes, in the so-called "Symbolidolatry," such an approach of immediacy.
position of multi-perspectivity and semantic innovation. To invite
students into the detour means to introduce them to the world of
symbols which, in the first place, requires an introduction and ace-
counting with the symbols' use of language and with the double-
meaning character of these forms of cultural and religious mani-
festations. This introduction implies a shift of the surplus of
meaning and of the ontological vanishment of this kind of double-
meaning expressions.

In the second place, it would be necessary to introduce students to
the context-related meaning of a specific act of symbols that is of re-
levance to one's own religious tradition. What is caused by sin, guilt, and
evil, by grace, salvation, and redemption, and by spiritual promise
and healing, is contained in symbols that deserve attention and reflec-
tion that need to be interpreted. And this requires that the religious
educator reserve for the religious symbols a prominent place.

However, of special value and importance for the hermeneutical
detour in religious education is the introduction of narratives. Nar-
atives refer in a more decisive way to the context, to temporality.
Here, what has been said about narrative fiction—that it refers (in ref-
erence to our pre-understanding) to a world of action and that the
imaginary conglomeration refers to (factual) "world of the text," to a
new reality—qualifies the narrative detour at most adequate also for
religious education. The conception and starting point of narrative
theology, that the language of religion is fundamentally narrative in
structure, has to be applied in religious education. Therefore, I would
suggest to move on from symptom-centered religious education ("Sym-
bolehndheit") to narrative religious education.

Familiarize Students with the Laboratory for Thought Experiments

A laboratory has an experimental task, it plays with possibilities
and hypotheses and puts them to test. This already implies a defini-
tion. A totalitarian system, a fundamentalist group, or an infallible
church does not need a laboratory for thought experiments; on the
contrary, questions and playing with alternatives may be regarded as
dangerous and may be prohibited. In terms of narrative analysis, it
can be stated that, in systems that are colonized by a mono-narrative
that is implicitly or explicitly auctoritas, a laboratory for thought
experiments has no place. This, however, would be a disqualification of

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religious and a contradiction of the "freedom of a Christian" and of
religion's freedom in general. It follows from this that religious edu-
cation needs to promote pluralism and tolerance, rather than the
streamlining and congruency of a collective religious identity. Reli-
gious education, therefore, has to refrain from any dominating, col-
onializing use of religious narrative, as if they were meta-narratives;
so the contrary, such (mis-)use should be subjected to critical discus-
sion in religious education.

Religious education is a laboratory of thought experiments. This
model appears to me most adequate, for it elaborates and builds
upon the detour model by giving stronger reference to the student's
life-world, and it accentuates even decisively the playful and ex-
erimentation with a variety of narrative possibilities. This is very
inspiring for religious education and for other fields in practical
theology, as well. To set this model into motion, a series of steps can be
suggested.

For the first step, narrative religious education will attend to the
"world of action," which is the hermeneutical scenario that is called pre-
understanding. This refers to the life-world of the person who begins
to engage in narrative experimentation. Because this life-world and
situation comes in story form, we could say that the first step consists
in listening and bringing to expression the everyday stories and every-
day myths of the students; in the German discussion, this is called
everyday orientation ("Alltagserlebnisse") or experience-related-
ness ("Erlebnisbezug"). Within these everyday stories, we can dis-
cern also the meta-stories, for we do not live on an island apart from
civilization and we cannot ignore the industrial revolutions of modern-
ity that influence the everyday world of every single person.

In a special department of our laboratory—still part of the first
step—this making explicit the pre-understanding is focused on work-
ning with people's own life stories, namely, the autobiographical reflec-
tion department. It is the loading assumption there that the person
who undertakes the experiments is the reader of his or her own life
story, which in oral or written form will become a text that later can be
rewritten and changed.

3 For an account of the implications of the narrative approach for the field of
pastoral care and counseling see my works, "Die Arbeiten Emanuels" (Stroh 1990).
4Comp. my essay on "Autobiographical Reflection and Faith Development"
(Stroh 1991).
THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR AS STORY-TELLER

A variety of methods belong to the second step. Some of the options are to invent a continuation of the story, to rewrite the story from a different perspective (for example, from an other person's perspective), or to engage in imaginative variation, in Ricœur's terms. In this imaginative variation, a variety of narratives, mostly fiction, feed into this process. A more explicit way of reference to fictional narratives would be to rewrite the story by using story grammar elements of other stories (for example, to rewrite the story using the character set of a fairy tale or the plot structure of a Bible story).

A specific focus of religious education is that, according to the proposal for the narrative theology of Metz, not only story-telling, but also "remembering" and "imagistic (solidarity)" are categories. These should be honored also in the laboratory for thought experiments. Religious education should engage especially in remembering particular events and people who have names; or to rewrite the stories by referring to particularity and to names. It has to deal with the question, "Whose story is listened to?" Small narratives and small-life-world narratives should be honored and held up over against meta-narratives. Of very special interest are the stories of the victims of history and the story of The Victims of history. It will give the story a specific significance and structure, when it is the result of fictional invention or imaginative variation that is inspired by this special kind of memory and solidarity.

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REFERENCES


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